

Voters to decide fate of ambulance transport fees Nov. 2

"In my profession, as a career lieutenant with the fire rescue service in a neighboring jurisdiction, where charging for (ambulance) transports has been in place for years now, I can personally attest to the implications of such a program. The fact that I am regularly met on emergency calls with reluctance, if not sheer refusal, to be taken for much-needed care cannot be discounted." — June 2010, James P. Seavey, Sr., chief of the Cabin John Park Volunteer Fire Department and the nation's 2009 volunteer fire chief of the year.

Despite accounts by Seavey and other first responders about the dangers of ambulance fees, advocates of the fees continue to blithely assert that there is no evidence of harm. However, studies in medical journals, including in the Journal of the American Medical Association, have documented that the high cost of emergency care, which includes ambulance fees of hundreds of dollars, cause some people experiencing heart attacks to delay getting critically important emergency treatment.

Unless voters repeal the ambulance fee law by voting against question A on Nov. 2, thousands of people in Montgomery County who need an ambulance will be charged \$300 to \$800 by the county. These people include uninsured co-workers who commute here and are stricken at their Montgomery workplace, and visiting relatives and friends who suffer a heart attack or stroke. Some of these people will drive themselves to an emergency room to avoid the fee, putting themselves as well as drivers and pedestrians they encounter en route in harm's way. Advocates of ambulance fees claim that residents won't pay a cent. However, insurance companies aren't charities, and will raise rates to protect their bottom line when the county bills for ambulance transport.

Ambulance fee proponents point to Fairfax County as a model. Yet, in the year that Fairfax implemented ambulance fees (fiscal 2005), the rate of emergency medical calls declined by nearly 10 percent and stayed at that lower rate for two more years, declining again in fiscal 2008 by almost 10 percent as many people lost their jobs and health insurance due to the recession.

County Executive Isiah Leggett, who intervened in court to try to prevent voters from even having the opportunity to vote on the ambulance fee law, has authorized on-duty career firefighters to leaflet Metro stations, shopping centers and high school football games to influence the vote on ambulance fees. Leggett is using our tax dollars to lobby us.

Projected ambulance fee revenue equals only one three-hundredth of county-funded budgets. Although Leggett found \$4 million for Costco and \$2.5 million for cost overruns for the Live Nation entertainment project, he has irresponsibly proposed laying off dozens of fire and rescue personnel to save \$4.5 million if voters repeal ambulance fees.

Voters shouldn't be intimidated by the county executive's scare campaign. He knows the County Council has final say on the budget and won't lay off dozens of firefighters. As it did last year, the council would cut non-essential spending.

In difficult economic times, responsible fiscal management requires making tough choices. Protecting public safety is the first responsibility of government, and the county shouldn't resort to chasing ambulances for revenue. Vote against question A.

Phil Andrews, Gaithersburg

The writer is a member of Montgomery County Council and chairman of the council's Public Safety Committee.

As a volunteer firefighter and EMT in Silver Spring, I oppose ambulance fees because I see firsthand the real harm they will do. Every shift, my crew and I help people who are in pain and in danger. Victims of domestic violence, car accidents, stabbings, or heart attacks all have one thing in common: they need help immediately, and they are absolutely and unequivocally entitled to emergency assistance.

Charging people for basic public safety and emergency services isn't just callous and unethical; it's dangerous. Here's the ugly reality from the ground: if ambulance fees are imposed in Montgomery County, thousands of vulnerable people would be charged \$300 to \$800 for 911 help. That would deter, delay, or hurt many of them.

Ambulance fee proponents in Rockville falsely claim that ambulance fees will be a "free lunch" paid for by people's insurance. Their armchair proclamations are fantasy.

I see the problems in my own ambulance. I recently treated an injured woman who, despite her obvious pain, asked me from her stretcher whether she would have to pay me. She was unable to walk, yet willing to crawl out of my ambulance for fear of getting billed. I assured her that we were a free service. But ambulance fees would make the answer dependent on her residency status, her insurance, and her income.

Those who think that fees have no costs and no deterrent effects should spend a night in a firehouse before making such brash claims. An economic textbook would provide a similar education: there are no free lunches, and imposing fees have sadly predictable consequences.

Fee-for-service is no way to run a responsible local government that already collects its taxes. Instead, I believe fire/rescue services, like police assistance, are public goods. They should be equally and freely available to everybody.

Darian Unger, Silver Spring

I am a paramedic associated with the Upper Montgomery County Volunteer Fire Department who wishes to clarify some misinformation being spread about question A, the ambulance reimbursement ballot measure.

The Montgomery County Volunteer Fire and Rescue Association did, in fact, vote to fight the implementation of the law that allows the county to seek reimbursement from insurance companies, Medicare and Medicaid for ambulance transports, but that decision by the association won only by a slight margin.

As it is, many of the volunteers I work with do not agree with the association's stance against ambulance billing, yet we have no voice within that association as individuals. We have watched helplessly as the volunteer association has manufactured facts, misquoted figures, manipulated words and spread fear among the general populace about future fees, hard billing, or where the money is going. Eric Bernard, the executive director of the volunteer association, has been divisive on so many issues it is hard to pick just one, but for the record, he does not speak for all of the fire and rescue volunteers within Montgomery County.

Personally, I am disgusted with the way he has repeatedly antagonized and polarized a system that should work very closely and smoothly together. A primary reason the volunteer association does not wish to see this pass is because they fear it would result in fewer donations to the individual volunteer fire departments by the community. They fear the community would think, "Why would I donate when the insurance company is already paying?" The answer is that the insurance company won't pay for all of it. Furthermore, dear taxpayer, you are already paying for it in both your insurance and your taxes. How does that make sense?

If this law gets repealed, and the ambulance reimbursement requests do not go to insurance companies, there are going to be fewer ambulances and medic units available. The loss of \$14 million in an already very tight budget will result in the loss of career firefighters and therefore the loss of emergency services. The volunteers will not be able to pick up the slack. Bernard and the volunteer association quote large, impressive numbers of volunteers every time I turn around. The truth of the matter is, even if those numbers were correct, (and personally, I highly doubt their veracity), those numbers do not reflect the actual number of active EMS and fire providers able to staff units, or who are currently on the Integrated Emergency Command Structure list as certified providers. In other words, folks, we need that money.

I am not a registered Republican, but I do believe in smaller government, and I would rather see any money that is reimbursed by the insurance companies returned to the tax payers. It is a shame that the vote didn't go that direction when the issue of reimbursement originally came up. But, the law was passed, and the resulting income was counted on in this year's budget. The horses are already out of the barn. Returning them

would cost the county \$14 million. That means it would cost you and me \$14 million, either in the form of money or services. It has got to come from somewhere ... it's either going to come from a tax hike, new county-imposed fees elsewhere, or cuts in services.

Understand this: If you vote "no" on the ambulance reimbursement, it will translate to you, the county taxpayer, as longer response times during an emergency because there will be fewer units and fewer personnel out there to respond — or it will translate to you in the form of higher taxes and fees — or both. Every department in the county could be affected ... attorney's office, snow removal, human services, anything the county budgets for will be at risk in this cut.

I am voting yes on question A to keep the law that allows reimbursement for county ambulance services, and I am a county volunteer medic, and I see firsthand why this county needs it.

Pamela Boe, Dickerson